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ABSTRACT

Representatives of Saskatchewan school boards have formed the Small Schools Network, which met three times in 1995 to share ideas regarding small schools. This first report from the Small Schools Network articulates significant concerns and questions related to education in small schools. Unclear definitions of the small school present a barrier to communication, research, and planning. The Saskatchewan provincial funding formula includes enrollment and location factors, but the resulting definition of smallness is not practical or consistent for the Network's purposes. Smallness is less challenging to elementary and middle schools, which often group students in nontraditional ways. On the other hand, secondary school size may be categorized according to provision of curriculum: as enriched, full-service, and basic schools. Network participants expressed concern over the struggle of small schools to meet new provincially defined education expectations, which have not been accompanied by corresponding support for program delivery. In addition, reliance on distance education and technological innovation required more time, resources, and leadership than were currently available. Network participants also identified the unique context of educational delivery in small schools; questioned the academic, social, and physical effects on students of busing; voiced concerns about school consolidation and the uncertainty of educational governance in Saskatchewan; expressed optimism about the impact of integrated services on small schools; stated that rural-urban differences in educational costs had not been satisfactorily addressed; and pointed out financial dilemmas of small schools due to a shift in funding from the province to the local tax base over the past decade. (SV)

ED 399 102

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Small Schools Network

SSTA RESEARCH CENTRE REPORT: #95-09 DATE: November 95

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Representatives of Saskatchewan school boards have been meeting to share ideas regarding small schools. The Small Schools Network held three meetings in 1995 at the Biggar Composite High School, Venture Heights Elementary School in Martensville, and at the Travelodge in Saskatoon.

This first report from the Small Schools Network is specifically focused on education in small schools and represents an important step in articulating significant concerns and questions.

As there are many small schools in Saskatchewan facing similar challenges, it is important to share best practice and consider new initiatives. The establishment of the Small Schools Network is intended to encourage the development of a support network and to provide leadership in exploring innovations for program delivery. Network participants have identified significant issues and suggested alternative ways of responding: inviting expert opinion leaders to make recommendations, advocating for shared responses by school boards, or encouraging individual school boards to respond as appropriate to their situation.

The opinions and recommendations expressed in this report are those of participants in the Small Schools Network. The Network has been established by the SSTA:

- to provide a forum and opportunity for school systems to explore and collaborate on innovative approaches to program delivery,
- to identify driving and restraining forces for enhancing program delivery, and
- to report and make recommendations to boards of education and the Association on approaches to enhancing program delivery in Saskatchewan.

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WHAT IS A SMALL SCHOOL?

Lack of clarity regarding 'What is a small school' presents a communication problem as well as a barrier to research and planning.

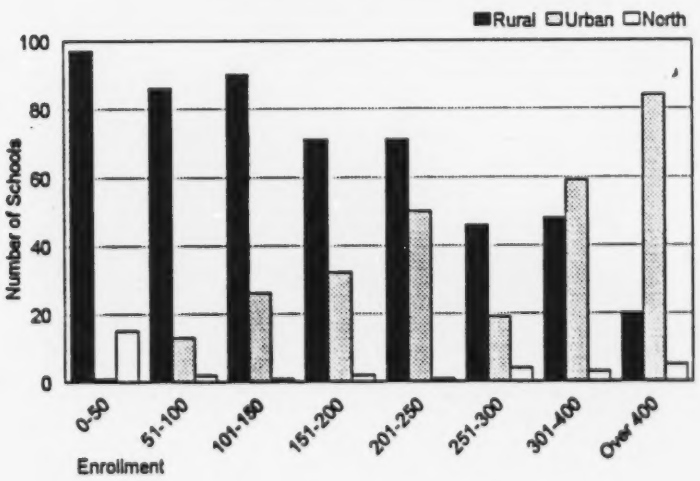
In Saskatchewan, funding eligibility and policy issues are linked to a school's smallness. Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment's Foundation Grant Formula includes recognition of an enrollment factor (small school) and a location factor (sparsity) for funding purposes. Small school funding is intended to assist rural school divisions which operate schools with low enrollments per grade. Funding recognition is based on a formula of 20 minus enrollment per grade to a maximum of 10, times a per pupil rate. The location component of the formula provides from 35% of maximum funding recognition to schools that are less than 10 kilometers apart to 100% of maximum funding recognition to schools that are greater than 30 kilometers apart. For the purposes of this Network, Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment's definition of smallness is not practical or consistent for it is intended for the allocation of funding and varies according to available funding.

If some definitions of smallness (fewer than 350 students) were to be employed, a high proportion of our prairie schools, rural and urban, would be placed in the 'small' category.

Renihan, P. And F.. (1991) School Effectiveness and Smallness... The School Trustee. (October).

While many people assume that small schools are rural schools, it is evident that many Saskatchewan schools are small schools.

Number of Schools by Enrollment in Saskatchewan
Rural, Urban and Northern - 1991



In developing a definition of a small school, it is necessary to distinguish between elementary/middle level and secondary level schooling. Maintaining a high quality of education in a small secondary school is a greater challenge than in a small elementary/middle level school. It is possible to establish an effective learning environment in an elementary/middle level school when there are only a few children of the same age.

Small elementary/middle level schools frequently group students in non-traditional ways. SSTA Research Centre Report #93-02 entitled **Grouping Students For Instruction** provides a research response to the question of "How should students be grouped for instruction?". The findings indicate that students don't necessarily have to be taught all day in a traditional age/grade classroom grouping. While parents often take a negative view of non-traditional classroom groupings, studies consistently show that students in multi-age classes do as well as students in single-grade classes in academic achievement, study habits, social interaction, self-motivation, co-operation and attitudes toward school.

A recent evaluation of grades 1-5 science education in Saskatchewan reported that 42% of the teachers taught in split-graded or multi-graded situations.

Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment. (1994) Science 1-5 Curriculum Evaluation Project Report. p. 8.

There is tendency for school systems to attempt to maintain a minimum number of students per grade at the secondary level for efficiency of delivery and optimizing the learning environment. Network participants stated that an optimal enrollment for organizing a secondary school does exist. Network participants acknowledged that many small secondary schools may eventually be closed but stressed the importance of recognizing that some small schools will remain open when busing is not a realistic option.

Secondary school size in Saskatchewan was considered in three general categories:

- **Enriched Schools**: A few large secondary schools offer the basic academic program plus a wide range of options within an environment of enriched resources. More than 24 students per grade level is typical.
- **Full Service Schools**: The majority of secondary schools in Saskatchewan offer the basic academic program with few electives. 12-17 students per grade level is typical.
- **Basic Schools**: A few secondary schools endeavor to deliver just the basic academic program with limited resources using creative approaches. Fewer than 10 students per grade level is typical.

What is a school?

It is suggested that minimal program expectations and delivery standards be defined.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF SMALL SCHOOLS

Educational Opportunity

Participants expressed concern regarding the struggle of small schools to meet provincially defined education expectations. **Directions** (1984) established high expectations for quality education consistent across the province and recommended the development of alternative delivery mechanisms to ease the difficulty that some schools have in delivering programs and services to their students. The **CORE** curriculum has established high expectations for course requirements, qualified teachers and special services. The introduction of these new expectations has not been accompanied by corresponding support for program delivery. At the elementary level, curriculum development has failed to acknowledge the reality of small schools and multi-grade classroom settings. At the middle and secondary level, small schools have a limited capacity to offer electives beyond basic academic courses and special education is difficult to support.

Alternate delivery mechanisms such as correspondence courses, modular course structure, and shared services should be expanded.

Saskatchewan Education. **Directions**. recommendation #3.

Small schools in Saskatchewan do have a proud history of notable success in educating previous generations for successful and productive lives.

A good school is a good school regardless of size

Small schools in Saskatchewan still educate a large percentage of our students under challenging conditions. As there will always be many small schools in Saskatchewan, greater attention and support is essential to acknowledge the special circumstance of small schools. Network participants stated that a defined vision of Government support for the future of education in rural areas is desirable.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY

A good deal of faith has been placed in the potential of distance education and new technologies to enhance program delivery in small secondary schools. Network participants acknowledged that reliance on technological innovation required more time, resources and leadership than were currently available.

The potential advantages of enhancing program delivery using educational technologies is currently outweighed by the costs of implementation. The effective utilization of educational technologies requires visionary leadership and considerable financial commitment. In addition, technology must be viewed as a consumable resource with a high rate of depreciation.

Distance education is not a panacea for small schools.

Increasing reliance on distance education will result in a corresponding loss of local control. Effective development and implementation is believed to require the economies of scale of a larger regional shared service approach. Reliance on distance education may force some small schools to adopt a common provincial timetable.

Many questions remain unresolved:

- Effective Instruction: Technology can serve as an aid to program delivery and enhancement but is not a substitute for good teaching.
- Financial Planning: Some boards are expanding their educational technology by mortgaging the purchase of equipment, and exploring potential savings through group tendering
- Local Control: Should school boards request that Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment provide conditional grants for the purchase of educational technology?
- Leadership: Provincial level leadership is necessary to co-ordinate and organize the delivery of distance education.
- Research: Further investigation is necessary to answer questions regarding program development, costs, effectiveness and implications for small schools.

Equity issues relating to costs and the availability of services must be addressed by SaskTel and Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Network participants identified the unique context of educational delivery in small schools.

The principal's leadership role is critical and demanding in the small school because of high visibility in the community.

Teachers in small schools face high expectations and often make sacrifices to their own detriment. CORE curriculum implementation has asked teachers in small schools to update too many subjects at one time and the course philosophy and structure is better suited to larger schools. Course development has assumed single grade delivery and is not intended for cross-grade groupings or thematic studies. Alternatives for grouping students for instruction should be explored in research, professional development, and teacher training. New roles for teachers should be explored that utilize computer assisted learning and community resource people.

The Saskatchewan Hutterian Educators' Association 'Curriculum Management Plan' presents a model of potential value to small schools. The Curriculum Management Plan integrates and aligns the objectives of the required areas of study into a teachable program for small schools.

Many so-called 'innovations being championed today were born of necessity long ago in the rural schoolhouse. Co-operative learning, multi-grade classrooms, intimate links between school and community, interdisciplinary studies, peer tutoring, block scheduling, the community as the focus of study, older students teaching younger ones, site-based management, and close relationships between teachers and students - all characterize rural and small school practices.

Stern, J.(1994) The Condition of Education in Rural Schools, U.S. Department of Education, page 1.

BUSING

Participants identified several questions to be addressed regarding busing. Research is required regarding the academic, social and physical affects of busing. How far should students be bused? How much time should students spend on the bus? Is busing safe? What are the alternatives to busing? Is busing the most effective and efficient alternative for children?

'How far should children be bused?' may be the wrong question. Perhaps we should direct our energies towards responding to the question, 'How can we effectively bring resources to the child?'

School Consolidation

Network participants expressed concerns about school consolidation. Experience has demonstrated that the consolidation of small schools has frequently been used to try and achieve cost savings and to improve the quality of education. These assumptions are questioned. The loss of the school has a significant impact on the future of a community.

Criteria based on educational opportunity and financial viability should be developed to guide school closure decisions.

Small schools may be very good but the demographics of the school make it a candidate for closure. Participants acknowledged that schools will close, therefore, emphasis must be placed on ensuring a fair process.

Questions regarding bussing distances, assessing the quality of education, and defining 'community' were suggested for further exploration. A good deal more needs to be done to answer questions when closure is immanent, regarding timing, the location of the alternate school, and governance representation.

When the cloud of school closure hangs over a small school it is a limiting force that creates a serious teacher morale issue.

Rural communities are mistaken when they uncritically accept urban agendas for development and renewal. The replacement of the one-room school with an urban-designed strategy for primary and secondary education is a good example. The one room school had certain pedagogical advantages over the urban school system. It compelled students to work on their own, to assume a certain measure of initiative. More important, it enabled students to relate their own immediate learning experiences and problems to an earlier period of their own education, and to the issues and challenges which lay ahead. There was not the same degree of the artificial compartmentalization of knowledge which one obtains in the urban system.

Dr. James McCrorie. (1990) "Prairie Forum on Rural Education". Canadian Plains Research Centre. Brandon. Fall.

Educational Governance

Participants expressed concerns regarding the uncertainty of educational governance in Saskatchewan. Small schools are caught in the administrative nightmare of waiting for clarification of a future orientated vision for how the delivery of education will be organized in Saskatchewan. Issues regarding school division amalgamation or restructuring and appropriate representation will impact on whether or not many small schools will stay open.

The Role of the School in Integrated School-Linked Services

Participants expressed optimism regarding the impact of the integration of services on small schools. Developing partnerships with outside groups to share resources will enhance the viability of many small schools. Areas for partnership exploration included regional libraries, regional colleges, health boards and social services. This Small School Network can serve as a clearinghouse of information regarding best practice and options for consideration.

A new generation of sustainable facilities are emerging that service the whole community. The Battleford School Division is now building a new community school facility at Maymont that integrates a K-12 school with the village office, town library, recreation centre, and arena.

Finance Policies and Practices

Participants stated that the cost differences in educating rural children versus urban children has been well articulated but not satisfactorily addressed. For example, a lower pupil-teacher ratio is a reality in a traditionally structured small school. The grant structure has established an artificial economy that can benefit and also threaten small schools.

There has been a significant shift in the source of educational resources away from the province to the local tax base over the past decade. School board efforts to reduce spending has had a significant impact on small schools. Education funding in Saskatchewan is at a crossroads and there are significant decisions to be made. Decisions must be reached and actions taken concerning several dilemmas:

- determining the level of spending and matching the delivery of education to the levels of funding available,
- examining sources of funding for education, and
- streamlining governance and administrative structures, teaching and learning processes, and administrative systems to achieve maximum efficiencies.

The Small Schools Network looks forward to further examination and clarification of the issues identified.